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ABSTRACT

Created to appeal to the conservative, older, part-time students that make up the school community, the Gender Program at the University of Akron represents a successful effort to broaden the base and impact of women's studies. Developed by a faculty-student committee over 3 years and instituted as an interdisciplinary certificate program in 1981, the curriculum now involves about 10 percent of the student body. Requirements include an introductory course on gender perspectives and either a field placement in an agency such as Planned Parenthood or a practical project. Past projects have ranged from observations of sex roles in Australia to the establishment of the Campus Campaign for Reproductive Rights. Students also choose from a wide variety of interdisciplinary electives such as Biology of Behavior, Sociology of Sex Roles, Human Sexuality, Fatherhood, and Parent Roles, as well as more conventional women's studies courses. While the program has been weakened by failure to involve all disciplines in its curriculum, its positive impact can be seen in the suggested extracurricular activities and campus-community interaction it has generated. Among the program's major achievements are a community film festival, a women's history week, and the sponsorship of the Northeastern Ohio exhibit of Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party." Although a relatively small project, University of Akron's gender curriculum suggests positive directions for the expansion of women's studies programs in the 1980's. (LP)

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Beyond Women's Studies: A Program in Gender Identity and Roles at The University of Akron

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At some universities and colleges Gender Studies was a deliberate choice to broaden the base and impact of Women's Studies. The Gender Program at The University of Akron is a mixture of choice, concessions and challenges. We would first like to place our program in historical perspective with the Women's Studies movement. In the 1970's The University of Akron found itself 5 to 10 light years behind the Women' Studies curriculum development. There were isolated pockets of feminist thought on campus and a few faculty members had added special topics courses involving women writers, women in novels, and educational equity for women. Dr. Robert Zangrando, my co-presenter, was one of the early leaders in adding courses on women to the History curriculum. One of our colleagues in the English Department began teaching freshman English from a feminist perspective in the late 1960's and recalled that she had never encountered so much student resistance and hostility.

Why had The University of Akron not taken a more active or progressive role in the Women's Studies explosion of the early 1970's? It can be easily explained by the conservative climate and milieu of Midwest America. It seemed that Women's Studies, like Psychiatry, flourished on the east and west coasts (Astin & Parelman, 1973) and had an impact only in more progressive midwestern universities and colleges. This was not the case in conservative Akron, Ohio, famous for rubber tires, the Soap Box Derby, and the Akron Abortion Ordinance. The University of Akron is the third largest state university in Ohio next to Ohio State and Cincinnati. The school is located about 12 miles from Kent State University. We have an enrollment of approximately 25,000 day and evening students. About 95% of our students do not live on campus but commute to school. The University of Akron students when compared to those attending residential schools are in general older, commuting and living at home, working full or part time, first generation college students, more vocationally

oriented, more traditional in thought, and in closer contact and relationships with their families and communities. The University evolved from its early beginnings in 1870 as a church related liberal arts college to a municipal university to a state university in 1967. The administration has always been patriarchal and conservative in fiscal and educational matters. Unfortunately, our neighbor, Kent State, serves as a negative reference point of what liberal thought and student activism can lead to. On the more positive side, The University of Akron had for some time served the needs of non-traditional part-time students by offering evening courses, extensive career counseling, and life-span planning programs. In addition, the University had a unique, positive and warm relationship to the community at large.

The Gender Program was developed in a three year period from 1978 to 1981 by a committee of faculty members and interested students. We began by offering a credit workshop entitled "Perspectives on Sex Roles and Identities" which featured a keynote session with Florence Howe. This workshop was offered in the summer of 1979. It was team taught by faculty members from different academic disciplines. Florence Howe met with University officials and discussed curriculum trends in Women's Studies. The workshop was offered under the administrative jurisdiction of the Institute for Life Span Development and Gerontology. The Institute director encouraged the committee of faculty and students to work towards developing a certificate or a minor program in Gender Identity and Roles. It took us three years to receive formal curriculum approval. In this three year period this same committee planned a number of campus events including seminars, speeches and discussions on a variety of topics related to the women's movement and changing sex roles. In 1980 we began to observe Women's History Week and met in the rain and cold at the site of Sojourner Truth's "And Ain't I A Woman?" speech. We sponsored a Women's Film

Festival and a variety of campus events. In September, 1981 we obtained approval to offer a certificate or minor program in Gender Identity and Roles.

This course of action involved a number of concessions. We opted for a program in Gender rather than Women's Studies as this was more realistic in terms of university approval and student interest. We established the Gender Studies Program under the umbrella of the Institute for Life Span Development and Gerontology. The Institute was established in February, 1976 to bring together disciplines and activities of the University in training, research and public service to evolve programs which would improve the quality of life for the young, middle aged, and elderly. The specific goal was towards an understanding of people at different stages of development and life. The Institute in its early years concentrated its efforts at the upper end of the life span and developed undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary Certificate Programs in Gerontology. The Director of the Institute envisioned programs which could cover all ages and stages of the life span from early infancy to adulthood to old age. He saw the Gender Program as a natural addition to the Institute. He also realized that the Gender Program would cost little to implement and would enhance the Institute by expanding its programs and course offerings. Since the Gender Program was an interdisciplinary venture, it was easier to find a home in the Institute than in an existiing academic department or to try to establish a new department and office. A drawback has been that Gender Studies have seemed to take a back seat to Gerontology. Gender is less popular than Gerontology.

The actual Gender Program goes beyond Women's Studies in that it includes courses traditionally found in Women's Studies and also courses that focus on the impact of male and female roles and their interaction. The student examines gender as a biological, psychological, political, sociological, historical, and

intellectual phenomenon: The biological roots of sexual and gender differences, the way societies mold these differences into the division between males and females, the historical changes gender definitions have undergone and their functioning in the contemporary world.

Eighteen credit hours compromise a Certificate in Gender. Students are required to complete a 3 credit course, "Perspectives in Gender Identity and Roles," which is taught by invited speakers from most all departments who offer elective courses in the Gender Program. This introductory course serves as an overview of gender issues from the vantage point of many academic disciplines. The other required 3 credit course is Independent Study, which consists of supervised research on gender and/or a community field placement in an agency related to gender. These agencies have included the Rape Crisis Center, Planned Parenthood, Community Drug Agency, Family Service, Safe Landing Program for Adolescents, and a Victim Assistance Program. One certificate student established the Campus Campaign for Reproductive Rights group which has kept this issue alive on campus. Another student observed and recorded sex roles in Australia and New Zealand and presented a multi-media speech on the subject to various community groups. One student developed on-site workshops on career changes at local shopping malls through The University of Akron Adult Resource Center which aids community people in career counseling and life-span planning. One student completed a research study on attitudes toward women among three generations of women - students, mothers and grandmothers.

In addition to these two required courses, students take an additional twelve elective credits selected from over twenty-five courses from fifteen different academic departments at The University of Akron. Some of the courses include traditional Women's Studies courses along with courses which specifically include the broader gender perspective. Some representative

courses are as follows: Relational Patterns in Marriage and Family, Fatherhood and the Parent Role, The Biology of Behavior, American Family History, Psychology of Sex Differences and Similarities, Sociology of Sex Roles, Types of Kinship and Social Organizations, Men and Women: Equality of Educational Opportunity, Women and Men in Transition, Intercultural Communication, and Human Sexuality. The bulletin description of the program is included in the Appendix of this report.

The Gender Program has had its share of successes and failures. As a truly interdisciplinary venture, the program has served to unite faculty, students, and administrators from many departments. The Certificate Program is a highly identifiable program which serves as a resource center for the rest of the University on issues of gender and Women's Studies. Faculty and students from a wide variety of disciplines have come together to share common intellectual research interests. We have monthly lunch meetings which often include speakers and programs. We also work with community groups in sponsoring speakers.

On the negative side, student enrollment in the program has involved only a small percentage of our 25,000 students and like many Women's Studies programs we have not attracted a significant number of males despite the emphasis on gender rather than Women's Studies. Estimates are that only 10% of a student body enroll in Women's Studies programs and only 10% of that number are males (Howe, 1973). A second problem is that although we have achieved some mainstreaming of Women's Studies and gender issues into introductory courses, we have met with resistance in terms of faculty development and administrative support. There are no courses in the College of Business Administration or Fine and Applied Arts which pertain specifically to women or gender. Women continue to be underrepresented in administrative positions at the University.

To show you how desperate there is a need for faculty development, recently our branch campus proposed a new course called "Expressions of Man." This course was described as an introduction to the intellectual and artistic heritage of humanity as it expresses and reflects societal and personal values. The course was developed specifically for technical students with extramural funding. Unfortunately, the title, content and bibliography eliminated the expressions and works of women and minorities. Faculty members associated with the Gender Program formally objected to the course addition and it is back in committee being revised to include the expressions of over half of the population--women and minorities. Some of you may feel a sense of disbelief that your academic colleagues in 1983 would dare to propose a course "Expressions of Man."

From a more positive view, the major strength of our program has been its strong tie to the community. Women's Studies began as a community based movement which gained its strength from the women's movement and the community of women-at-large. As Women's Studies became entrenched with the confines of the university and gained academic legitimacy they seem to have lost touch with community women. Carroll (1978) points to a growing separation between academic Women's Studies and community women's organizations. The Gender Program at The University of Akron is tied intimately to the community. Perhaps there are so few feminists that we need to band together. Faculty from the Certificate Program serve on executive and advisory boards of community organizations. The University of Akron has worked together on a variety of issues and projects. Our first joint project involved bringing Sojourner Truth out from her hiding place in Akron's history. Sojourner Truth, a former slave, gave her world famous speech "And Ain't I A Woman?" at a Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851. Most of the citizens and students of Akron had never

heard of Sojourner or her speech. In March of 1980 a handfull of faculty and students from The University of Akron and community men and women huddled in the cold at the site of her speech and celebrated Women's History Week. At that time we began a grass roots fund raising campaign to purchase an historical marker to commemorate the speech. Finally, a year and a half later in August of 1981, we gathered to dedicate the plaque. After this initial successful fund raising effort, we tackled what seemed to be an impossible dream--The Midwest premier of Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party." My co-presenter, Dr. Zangrando, in the Summer of 1980, gathered representatives from a number of Akron community organizations: NOW, Rape Crisis Center, Planned Parenthood, Women's Network and Women's Caucus for the Arts. He proposed that we bring the controversial "Dinner Party" to Akron, Ohio as a fund raiser. We tried to bring the exhibit to Akron, but early on, it became evident that we lacked the community and institutional support to undertake a venture of this magnitude. The Akron group teamed up with men and women in Cleveland and together we raised enough initial funds to underwrite the exhibit and bring it to Northeastern Ohio. It was an incredible experience for the faculty, students and community people who participated in all aspects of the project from fund raising to site preparation to opening night to take down. One student in her stocking feet proclaimed in disbelief, "I'm walking on the Dinner Party floor." Though some of us thought that the exhibit would be a losing proposition that we would pay for professionally and financially the rest of our lives, it turned out to be an artistic, academic and financial success. We are now involved in distributing the $57,000 profit from the Dinner Party Exhibit to women's groups in Northeastern Ohio.

Another area of achievement is that The University of Akron Gender Program has served as a catalyst in planning community celebrations of Women's History

Week. From our first celebration in 1980 at the Sojourner Truth site we have celebrated continuously through four different events. In 1981 we had a reception at The University of Akron for university and community men and women and tied it into a benefit showing of the film "Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party." In 1982 over 34 women's groups in the greater Akron area joined together to put on an Information Fair featuring the history of each participating group and an historic fashion show. This year thirty-four women's groups joined together to celebrate Women's History Week by honoring outstanding women in the Akron area. Awards were given by Dagmar Celeste, the wife of our Governor, at a luncheon attended by 450 people. The wife of our Governor is a recent Women's Studies graduate. Her personal goal is a Women's Studies degree program in every state university. The women's groups who participated ranged in ideology from radical feminist to conservative traditional women. From NOW to National Council of Catholic Women. It is wonderful to see so many non-feminist women celebrate their history if only for one day or one week a month. It's a start.

We believe that our Gender Program may represent some possible directions for curriculum in the 1980's. Schools with Women's Studies programs may expand to include programs in gender or those who have lagged behind in Women's Studies and operate in similar conservative environments may find a gender progream more acceptable to university curriculum committees. In an area of limited non-existent resources, tapping into an established university department or unit seems more viable than trying to empire build a new unit. Finally, we urge university women to re-establish ties with the community. The benefits to you as faculty members and to your students are enormous. The future of the women's movement is dependent upon change in the community-at-large.

In summary, the Gender Program at The University of Akron is small and perhaps insignificant in terms of numbers but vital and necessary in terms of its impact on our faculty and student body and our community women and men.

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